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Indeed, these popular dances brought distinctive African American gestures to international populations. The rise of the Charleston and other eccentric dances on theatrical stages demonstrated a cycle in which social dances first emerged in regional locations; traveled to New York, where they were further refined; were transmitted to the New York stage, where they became the toast of the town; and then were performed abroad to great acclaim. The Savoy Ballroom provided dancers with a space to develop many new social dances that then became featured acts on the Apollo stage, including the Harlem stomp, peckin', the Lindy hop, and the big apple.

Decoding "coded" Language:
The Code: Runnin' Wild Was the Name of the Popular 1923 Revue Which Popularized "The Charleston" Danced By Flappers and entertainers internationally.

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Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing

How the
Apollo Theater
Shaped American
Entertainment

*Edited by Richard Carlin
and Kinshasha Holman Conwill*

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE
THROUGH SMITHSONIAN BOOKS
WASHINGTON, DC

To John Hope Franklin,

who taught us the

importance of remembering,

and to Percy Ellis Sutton,

whose foresight helped preserve

our cultural institutions

Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing: How the Apollo Theater Shaped American Entertainment is the companion publication to the exhibition of the same name produced by the National Museum of African American History and Culture in collaboration with the Apollo Theater Foundation.

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steps, foot-flicking gestures, and abrupt freezes between phrases. As in other eccentric dances that featured individualized movements, the turkey trot encouraged invention. In a breakaway section, the couple separated, and each dancer explored his or her own rhythmic ideas before returning to partner formation.

Like many African American social dances, the turkey trot was derided by some for its so-called lewd and uncivilized, bent-kneed hopping and pecking gestures. But these distinctive gestures made the dance fun for everyone who did it. Mimicking the imaginary behavior of animals became a way for dancers to enjoy a release from the pressures of crowded urban life and to playfully engage a creative response to the new sounds of jazz music. Animal dances became a string of fads, each aptly named for some distinctive gesture. The camel walk, the chicken scratch, the grizzly bear, the bunny hug, the kangaroo hop, and the various “wing” dances—chicken wing and pigeon wing—each illustrated in playful exaggeration an aspect of animal behavior. Many of these dances had analogues in southern plantation settings that transferred to the Harlem of the '20s.

Some social dances of this era traveled from rent parties and nightclubs to the theatrical stage and back again. These dances, including the black bottom and the Charleston, featured extravagant body part isolations, especially in sinewy or sudden motions of the pelvis and spine, and rolling gestures of the torso, shoulders, elbows, and knees in unexpected continual waves or accented, rhythmic jerking. The snake hips dance, popularized by the impressive performances of Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker, a soloist with Duke Ellington’s orchestra, emphasized successional movements that included the hips and pelvis, coupled with twisting motions of the feet.

The black bottom—named for districts in various American cities—allowed dancers a simple solo structure that encouraged improvisation. The dance involved slapping your hips and hopping forward and back, touching the ground, and letting your backbone slide from side to side. As a social dance, the black bottom originally had little cachet, but when stage performers started demonstrating personable, virtuoso versions of the dance, it gained currency for general audiences of African American social dancers. Stage shows that played at the Apollo Theater

in the '30s featured the dance with specially written music that called out its steps, so that audiences could learn it and repeat it at home. These popular versions of the dance, arranged by musicians including Jelly Roll Morton and sung by entertainers including Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, encouraged its adoption by white Americans and international audiences.

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The Lindy hop clearly related to earlier black social dances, including the turn-of-the-century Texas Tommy, but it differed in its close relation to the propulsive rhythms of swing music and its intricate rhythmic footwork patterns. “Shorty” George Snowden, a celebrated dancer, has been credited with naming the dance after the aviator Charles “Lindy” Lindbergh, who made the first successful nonstop solo flight across the Atlantic. Various groups, including the Shorty Snowden Dancers and Herbert “Whitey” White’s Lindy Hoppers, performed it on international tour and in the movies. Frankie Manning, who